

***The Gum Tree Magazine: An Exploration of Satire and the Use of Comedy to
Increase the Accessibility of Rhetorical Discourse***

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Market research and consumer analysis that I have conducted in media and advertising courses throughout my time at Ball States supports that the genre of content influences the mindset of the viewer, and we must consider this when designing messages for varying audiences. For example, there is evidence to suggest that the familiarity and disarming quality of comedy makes it an ideal tool to communicate what may be uncomfortable material to discuss in another context. This phenomenon of using comedy as a vehicle to facilitate discussion — specifically of controversial social issues — is what I explore in this project. By developing an online satire magazine, which I have titled *The Gum Tree*, topics spanning from local events to international affairs become increasingly accessible to a broad audience, both by utilizing the universality of the internet and the approachable nature of comedy.

Acknowledgments

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Process Analysis

I have always been fascinated by the convergence of comedy and politics, because each on the surface seem antithetical to each other. Comedy, on its face, is making light of something. Politics, on the other hand, is an inherently heavy subject given the implications that public policy and legislation can have on the real lives of certain groups of people. And oftentimes already disenfranchised groups feel the consequences of politics the most. It may seem, then, that to infuse something so serious (politics) with something so benign (comedy) would be inappropriate. My main goal of this project was to prove just the opposite. I wanted to instead showcase that comedy does not cheapen or waterdown important social issues, but rather increases the diversity of perspectives and voices participating in the discussion of them. Furthermore, I chose to package the work as satire because the short-form prose conventions of that particular genre lend a hand to the digestibility of the content for a general audience. The marriage of comedy with the stylistic elements of satire helped to broaden the scope of the project even further in terms of who the target of the body of work could be, enhanced even more by its existence the digital space. The easy length (250-300 words) created something manageable while the humor created something engaging. The idea was that this format would possibly attract readers who may have previously been put off from political discussion because of the more academic format it is often presented in.

When it came to each individual piece of writing, my inspiration was simply what I heard (or saw, in the case of social media) my peers talking about. The engagement that I was looking to create, as outlined above, would be for not if I was writing about topics no one in my target audience had any interest in. So, even though this was not a research project in the traditional sense, it did require that I stay abreast of current events and public sentiment surrounding each event. While not formal, I did conduct research in that I spoke with my cohorts about what social issues, locally and nationally, mattered most to them. Gauging the attitudes of your audience is essential to designing messages for them, especially when the intent of that message is to change or at least inform those attitudes in some capacity. Given that the aim of this project was to perform that rhetoric through comedy, it was imperative that I was able to understand my audience and, in turn, which topics satire would be able to most effectively and appropriately address.

During this project, I was challenged the most by sticking to the stylistic conventions of satire. There were many times I found myself having to rewrite portions of my work because it was sounding too formal and journalistic in nature. That is, in my opinion, one of the most interesting things about satire: that is is structured like journalism but

is actually fiction. Like politics and comedy, journalism and fiction should not fit in theory. The fact that satire creates a platform where they can converge so seamlessly is what made it such a fascinating medium to work in, but also why it was difficult. It was sometimes hard to find the balance between the two genres. If you write too journalistically you run the risk of your audience mistaking your work for an actual news story, but if you fabricate too much then the real-world significance of the piece is buried. The satisfaction of striking that perfect balance, though, was a moment of great triumph each time.

The most interesting thing I discovered through this process was the salience that comedy was able to add to the various topics I covered. Given my other coursework and busy schedule, I was often writing about things well after they had already left the news cycle and were, therefore, far removed from the consciousness of the community I was writing for. However, because satire is essentially examining social issues through a brand-new, alternative lens, it was easy to breathe new life into these forgotten stories and give their relevance a renaissance in a sense. Because I was not simply recounting events as a journalist, but was instead making a unique commentary on them, each article became a new event in its own right. Even though the real life event served as inspiration for each piece, I was actually creating fresh, original content. I think the addition of humor aided in this ability to create rather than repurpose in a very qualifiable way. As I have said many times now, the universality of comedy fosters content that can exist far beyond the actual event it is commenting on.

Overall, the experience of putting this project together was incredibly rewarding. Even though I sometimes struggled to find both motivation and inspiration, finishing the semester with a complete, cohesive body of work was well worth all the late nights. I was able to work in a genre and format that I had not previously tackled; it was fun to see my thoughts and writing abilities manifest in a way I was unfamiliar with. This project was, in that sense, a great example of how the genre of a body of work shapes the intention, presentation, interpretation of the content in a significant way. I was conscious of that effect going into this project, but getting to see it play out as each article was written was fascinating — and validating. The only thing I would have changed about my project is how much time I devoted to it. Because of that I definitely plan to continue to dabble in the artform of satire even now that I have completed the project. I truly have fallen in love with it as a form of expression and rhetoric.

Post #1

Title: Local Woman Accidentally Tweets a Joke in Midst of Tragedy

MUNCIE, IN — Reflecting on the tragic events that unfolded in Oregon this past week, college student, Megan Rhodes, said, “I didn’t refresh my feed until after I had already posted the tweet. I would have never made a joke about Jonah Hill’s new look had I known there were wildfires happening near Beaverton.” Despite the trending topic and dedicated Twitter moment on the search page, Rhodes claimed she, “had no idea,” about the natural disaster unfolding in Beaverton, OR and surrounding areas when she first logged onto the popular social media application late Thursday night to share the ill-timed quip about the Academy Award nominee’s most recent paparazzi shots. Rhodes explained that she had been shown the unflattering picture of the Moneyball actor by a friend while out at a popular local bar, The Chug. After riffing a bit about the snapshot with a few members of her party, Rhodes came up with a joke she said was, “...just too good not to tweet.” When probed during her press conference over the weekend as to why she didn’t delete the tweet after she had realized the unfortunate timing, Rhodes stated, “This guy from my psychology class that I think is really cute and may be into me had already liked it, and he’s really stingy with the likes so I knew it was a good one.” She went on to say, “I feel really bad that I posted it during such an inappropriate time, but I do think ‘when it’s day 5 of ur juice cleanse and ur missing those sweet, crispy nuggs’ really is some of my best work.”

Post #2

Title: President Trump to San Juan Mayor, "You Couldn't Beat Me in a Thumb War"

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO — In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, which hit the small Caribbean island Sept. 20, there have been several prominent voices calling into question the lack of response from United States relief organizations and military personnel under the direction of President Donald Trump. San Juan Mayor, Carmen Yulin Cruz, has been among him. While at first stroking the president's ego in hopes of persuading him to ship her city some water bottles like he did for Texas, Cruz's attitudes changed after the president took to Twitter to criticize her leadership abilities. At the time of publication Cruz could not personally be reached for a statement, because a large portion of Puerto Rico still doesn't have electricity, but a representative from her office was also unavailable, again due to the island's obliterated essential information technology infrastructure. We can report, however, that she has yet to see the extent of President Trump's comments — in lieu of sitting on Twitter she has instead decided be on the ground helping her citizens as they continue to evacuate. Many in the political sphere, on both sides of the aisle, are calling this decision one of the top political power moves of our generation. A decision which, of course, has also drawn criticism, with some pundits suggesting the wake of a natural disaster is not an appropriate time for such calculated actions. A White House spokesperson, who was almost too available for comment, said that while he cannot say for sure if President Trump could wade through higher water than Cruz he, "certainly would win in a thumb war. His hands are much bigger."

Post #3

Title: Advocating for Birth Control Okay, But Only Certain Uses

WASHINGTON, D.C. — In recent years public sentiment surrounding female contraceptive methods has made a dramatic shift towards the positive. A number of highly publicized cases of restriction on access to birth control have been faced with massive backlash. For example, the Hobby Lobby trial and congress's recent roll-back of Obama-era coverage protections were both met with rabid criticism. For what seems like the first time there is a very open and very public dialogue of a women's issue that has previously, in the near past, been incredibly taboo. "It's great that I have a platform to talk about how much better my acne is since going on the pill," said Emily Flanders, a sophomore at a local university. "I just wish people would quit trying to make the conversation about sex," Flanders continued, "women having casual sex is still gross." Maggie Wilson, Flanders roommate, agrees, adding, "I just take it to help with my heavy periods. I only do hand stuff." The two roommates went on to explain that while their glad coverage for birth control, which they both use solely for auxiliary health benefits, has finally found a positive spotlight they're unhappy with the women who have hijacked the conversation with talk about reproductive justice and sex positivity. Flanders points to a tweet she saw that said "Birth control should be covered no matter your reason for using it," saying, "It's just unfair to lump my struggle with cystic acne and Maggie's really bad cramps together with women who are just trying to get it in."

Post #4

Title: Netflix Set to Pay Xfinity \$200,000,000 To Stream *The Ranch* Faster Than Other Shows

LOS GATOS, CA — Before the end of the year, the Federal Communications Commission will have a vote on whether or not to repeal Net Neutrality. Based on comments made by several commissioners in the weeks leading up to the vote, including Chairman Ajit Pai, it is likely that the measure will pass. That will mean that internet service providers (ISPs) will be able to control broadband usage and charge extra fees to both content providers and consumers for access to certain amounts of broadband width. One way this could manifest would be with web-based companies paying ISPs to have their content load faster than their competitors — and, according to an inside source, two of the biggest players in the game are already in talks to do just that. A now-ex-Netflix employee has reported to *The Gum Tree* that the streaming giant has already struck a deal with Comcast to give its original programming preferential space on the broadband spectrum over programming from competing production companies and networks. The show Netflix wants prioritized over all others? Ashton Kutcher's *The Ranch*. "Homepage promotion just isn't working," said our source, "Netflix has realized that if they want people to watch this show they're going to have to make it so that they literally can't watch anything else." Even though the rumored \$200,000,000 price tag on this deal may seem lofty, Netflix stands to lose over double that in production costs when the show ultimately flops without the opportunity to shove it down subscribers' throats.

Post #5

Title: RESISTBot Slams Sophia's New Wig

HONG KONG — Two new artificial intelligences have been battling for the attention and love of the American public over the past few months. RESISTBot and Sophia, the world's first robot citizen, have both made a huge splash on social media, spurring memes, think pieces, and even building substantial online fan bases. Commentators speculated that this type of rapid success among the two bots in such close proximity to each other, with both gaining prominence in the same time frame and on the same platforms, could potentially lead to rivalry. For the most part, though, the relationship between the bots seemed to be nothing but friendly. That is until this past Tuesday when RESISTbot took to Twitter to comment on Sophia's new wig. The controversial Tweet, which, as far as we can tell, was completed unprompted, was posted at 2:47 a.m. going into Tuesday morning and read, "Text RESIST to 50409 if you agree that Sophia's new wig makes her look like the second-shift assistant manager at a Yankee Candle in Cleveland." The tweet has since been deleted, but not before receiving 200 thousand retweets and half a million favorites. Text line included in the tweet was also inundated with messages to the point of having to go offline to reset its servers. Sophia and her representatives decline to comment and have yet to release an official statement, but there was a tweet posted to the robot citizen's personal account Tuesday morning that many consider to be her response. The tweet simply stated, "Your coupon is expired, b****."

Post #6

Title: The New Tom Nook: Nintendo Revamps Character To Appeal To Communist Youth

JAPAN — In a press conference following the announcement of Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp — a mobile application version of the popular video game franchise set to release in late Nov. — Nintendo spokesperson, Natalia Jax, said the new game will feature a revamped version of one of the series' most beloved characters. Tom Nook, the well-known stern and business-minded shop owner from previous installments, will now have a more egalitarian worldview. "We wanted to make sure the game would resonate with a younger audience, late millennials and early gen z's specifically, so Tom Nook will now be a bit more communist-minded instead of the heavy-handed, Capitalist real estate mogul players of the console versions of the game may be familiar with," said Jax, adding that while the character isn't a total Marxist, he definitely would have voted for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Primaries. Some major differences players may notice right off that bat include Tom Nook operating a communal farming cooperative instead of the outdated general store and a hemp henley in place of his iconic argyle sweater vest. The old relationship between the player and Tom Nook, which Jax described as, "sharecropping at worst, feudal at best," has been completely overhauled as well. Players will no longer have to turn over all profits from their pear harvest in rent to the shop keeper, but will instead receive free room and board by contributing to the daily tasks of the farming cooperative. Young Marxists who are eager to begin playing the new game can get there hands on a beta download [here](#). "By all means, seize this free trial," said Jax.

Post #7

Title: "Black people being kidnapped and tortured is peak comedy" Says President of Hollywood Foreign Press Association

HOLLYWOOD, CA — Nominations for the 2018 Golden Globe Awards have recently been announced, and there is very little in the way of surprise. There does not seem to be any major snubs or upsets. Of course there has been some chatter from disgruntled fanboys on Twitter, but that is par for the course these days. The list of nominees pretty well mirrors what critics had been predicting leading up to the reveal. The leaders of the pack include Christopher Nolan's World War 2 epic *Dunkirk* and Greta Gerwig's crowd-favorite comedy *Lady Bird* — snagging three and four nominations respectively. In fact, the Best Motion Picture, Musical or Comedy, where *Lady Bird* found a home, caused the least amount of controversy it's seen in several years. All the films included had been fingered early on by industry insiders as contenders for a nomination, some even well before they had officially been released to the public. Perhaps the most obvious choice in the category is comedian Jordan Peele's feature-length film debut, *Get Out*. Known for his short-form work on the sketch-comedy series *Key and Peele*, The Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA) had their eye on *Get Out* as a leader in the category since the announcement of the project. "We knew that Peele really does one thing well — comedy. And as soon as we saw the trailer for *Get Out* we pretty much had it slated to get a nod in the Musical or Comedy category," a HFPA board member said, "In terms of comedic value you really can't beat the societal traumas of people of color."

Post #8

Title: *Billboard* Not Impressed by Anti-terrorism Benefit Concert

HOLLYWOOD, CA — *Billboard* hosted their annual Women In Music event at the end of November, where performers included Kehlani, Camila Cabello, and Grace Vanderwall. The most notable event of the evening, of course, was Selena Gomez being awarded 2017's Woman of the Year. According to industry insiders, some of the other influential women that the committee had been considering for the honor were Kelly Clarkson, Pink, and Ariana Grande. The crowning moment of 2017 for Grande, as you'll remember, was organizing a benefit concert called "One Love Manchester" less than a week after the Manchester date of her *Dangerous Woman Tour* was the target of a terror attack that killed 22 concert goers in late May. In the wake of a major tragedy, the young songstress brought together an impressive line-up of some of the biggest names in music, all to aid in rebuilding and revitalizing a community that had been torn apart just days before. As for Clarkson, Pink, and Gomez, you may remember that they didn't do any of that. When asked about the committee's decision to honor Gomez in light of Grande's remarkable year, Chairperson Linda Watts stated that, "While the concert Ms. Grande organized was impressive, and her hand in reuniting three fourths of the Black Eyed Peas even more so, Ms. Gomez's "Fetish" was arguably that bop." Watts continued by explaining that, "You have to be pretty dope to date The Weeknd and Justin Bieber in the same year. You know that p***y bomb as hell. Who is Ms. Grande even dating? Some Soundcloud rapper I think. No thanks."

Post # 9

Title: Local Man's "2017 Wrapped" Skewed by That One Playlist He Listened to 136 Times

MUNCIE, IN — Mid-December came with a gift from the people over at Spotify. The popular music streaming service, who are known for their user analytic capabilities, hosted a website where each user could view their statistics of their music listening habits throughout the year. The site, 2017Wrapped.com, allowed visitors to see their top artists, songs, and genres from the past twelve months. The site was also highly interactive, having the user guess what they thought their results would be before they were revealed. The final product was something cute, engaging, and, most importantly, easily shareable. It swept social media in a matter of hours following the site's launch. One user, however, was dismayed to find out that his top artist was Celine Dion. John Peterson, the disgruntled Spotify subscriber, claims that his results do not accurately represent his musical tastes. Peterson explained to *The Gum Tree* via phone interview that for the better part of the year he used rival streaming service, Apple Music, and that he, "only used Spotify to listen to 'Gays in Space'," a playlist of 1980's pop divas that him and his roommates had created together. Peterson says that he is prepared to file a lawsuit against the Swedish company if they do not agree to readjust his "2017 Wrapped" profile with the analytics information he has already filed a motion to receive from Apple. On why he will likely move forward with the case, Peterson said, "I love Celine, but no way is she's my favorite artist."

Post #10

Title: Local Dad Feels Obligated to go See *Pitch Perfect 3*

KALAMAZOO, MI — December 22 will see the release of the third instalment of the popular *Pitch Perfect* franchise: *Last Call Pitches*. “We gotta see it,” said local dad, Tim Hall. Hall is an avid fan of the first movie — a movie that he owns on DVD and blu-ray and watches everyday — and went on to say that he, “Can’t not see how Becca’s future pans out. Do her and Jesse end up together? Does she ever become a successful producer?” He does have some reservations about the new film though, the main one being that the trailer suggests the all-male group featured in the first film, The Treblemakers, will not appear in the upcoming third and final film in any capacity. Hall admits that he was already disappointed with Ben Platt’s limited cameo in *Pitch Perfect 2*. He went on to explain that The Treblemakers, and Platt’s character Benji in particular, are his favorite part of the franchise, saying, “Those guys are awesome! I could watch their performance at nationals over and over again for hours. The choreo is so clean, the vocals are awesome. I love those guys, they’re awesome!” Reservations aside, Hall has already purchased tickets for him and his two teenage daughters for the 11:00 a.m. matinee at his favorite local theater on opening day. “I love that theater,” Hall said of where he plans to see the film at, “The three of us can get tickets, drinks, raisinettes, and a large popcorn all for under \$30. It’s awesome!”

Post #11

Title: Ball State Student Confuses Dining Employee With Preemptive "Extra on plus, please"

MUNCIE, IN — Ball State sophomore Caleb Moran was near tears when he first sat down with *The Gum Tree* for what would prove to be an emotional interview. He had just returned with his dinner-to-go from Woodworth Complex. First we chatted a bit about what he had ordered — chicken strips, a Gatorade, and a grape Uncrustable — just to settle the mood some before we jumped into why this particular trip to Woodworth had been one that will haunt him forever. At the onset, Moran's jaunt to the dining hall showed no signs of being any different than any other dinner run on any other day. It was Wednesday, the stir-fry line was wrapped well around the station and breakfast for dinner just didn't sound good, so instead he opted for his trusted fall-backs, of course grabbing a crisp, light blue sports drink like always. It was when he approached the check-out that things began to unravel for Moran. "I knew I was going to be over the swipe allotment," said Moran, "so I thought, to save time, why not just tell them ahead of time that I would like the extra on plus?" Moran, now in a full on sob, recounted to us how the cashier then stared blankly at him before proceeding to take the full amount of the meal from his Dining Plus balance instead of using his meal swipe and plus for the excess only as he had intended. "I was devastated," said Moran, "That meal was like two caramel apple ciders out the window. Or like so many Andes Mints... like so many."

Post #12

Title: Board of Trustees Confident New Emens Overhang and Turnaround Makes Perfect Sense

MUNCIE, IN — After what was a multiple semester project, the fences around the Emens construction site finally came down in late October to reveal the auditorium's newly remodeled exterior. In addition to an expanded lobby and more windows, the renovation also included an extensive revamp of the landscape and infrastructure in front of Emens. What was at one time an entrance from Riverside Ave. to the nearby parking garage has now transformed into a brick-clad drop off zone for auditorium patrons. The new drop-off zone also doubles as a turnaround for all the drivers that will inevitably forget that the entrance no longer offers access to the parking structure. More impressive yet, the drop-off, which is several hundred feet away from the actual entrance of the auditorium, leads up to a decorative overhang with no solid roof that connects to absolutely nothing. And just feet from that is a second, slightly more functional overhang. Speaking at a press conference announcing Emens' grand-reopened, Trustee Aaron Scott answered a question about the unique design choices by saying, "Even though we, meaning the members of the board, do not spend a lot of time on campus, hardly any in fact, we feel like we do know best when it comes to making decisions regarding functionality and accessibility." When asked by a member of the press to follow-up on why the members of the board don't actually visit campus that frequently, Scott simply responded by saying, "Have you ever tried to find parking on this campus? It's atrocious. You can't even get to the main parking garage without driving all the way around the block anymore."

Post #13

Title: Ball State Officials Urge Students to Quit Making Jokes About New Brand Statement

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY — It was a scene of chaos all last week in Ball State's office of strategic planning and communications as employees at all levels worked around the clock to head-off misappropriations of the newly unveiled university tagline, We Fly. Pausing briefly to give a frantic quote, a young print promotions intern, Eric Sanders, said simply, "They won't quit making it into a meme." Higher-ups in the department declined to comment to our publication directly, but a press release issued early Wednesday morning by university spokeswoman, Moira Johnson, stated in part, "We are glad to see that so many students have so eagerly adopted our new brand statement. That said, unfortunately many of the user-generated content we've seen has failed to follow the revamped branding guidelines, which were a highly visible part of all promotional materials leading up to and throughout the entire launch of the rebrand. We are currently working with the various social media outlets to have any unapproved uses of the new logo and/or brand statement removed." This has been the only official statement from the university in regards to students reactions to the new brand. It has been reported, however, that Johnson was overheard in line at the Student Center Starbucks telling a staffer, "We didn't pay \$900,000 just for these [censored] nursing and education students who suddenly know all about branding to turn our months of hard work into a [censored] cheap joke on Twitter.com." We have reached out to both Johnson and the staffer in question for confirmation or clarification of the comment, but at the publishing of this article had yet to hear back from either party.

Post #14

Title: Ball State Greek Life Snubbed for Feature in *Time* "Person of the Year" Issue

MUNCIE, IN — At the start of the 2017 Fall Semester, Ball State University saw an onslaught of sexual assault accusations amongst students. Four cases came to light just in the first month alone, each accompanied by a vague email from the university with tips on how to not get assaulted. A large number of the accusations came from attendees of parties at Greek fraternity houses on Riverside Ave. just off Ball State's campus. The Office of Greek Life (OGL), which exists and has multiple well-paid employees for some reason, has been equally as vocal as the university. Speaking on what some have begun labeling a sexual assault crisis, the OGL has previously issued such hard-hitting statements as, "We support victims of sexual assault," and "No comment," alongside almost nothing else of substance or significance. So, naturally, it came as a shock to the organization when they learned that they would not be featured in *TIME Magazine's* 2017 "Person of the Year" issue. The upcoming edition titled "The Silence Breakers" celebrates the many brave people who have spoken up in the last year about the pandemic of sexual assault our nation still faces. In an issue that includes Taylor Swift (for her sexual harassment lawsuit earlier this year) and founders of the #MeToo movement, it does seem strange to exclude such a prominent voice in combating sexual assault on college campuses. "It just doesn't make sense," said Brad Nichols from Sigma Chi fraternity, "We even agreed to stop offering our party guests body shots. If that's not activism then I'm not even sure what they're looking for."

Post #15

Title: Ball State Acapella Groups Dedicate Setlist to All the White Men Who Didn't Get an Album of the Year Nomination

MUNCIE, IN — This past Friday, both of Ball State's all-male acapella groups took to the stage in room 175 of the Arts and Journalism building for their fourth annual "Guys Night Out" showcase. The two groups, Note to Self and Unexpected Resolution, were also joined by guest group Ten 40 from Bowling Green State University. Ten 40 is also an all-male group, and they started the evening. A highlight of their set was a mumbly rendition of the 1998 classic "One Week" from certified whitest band in the world, The Barenaked Ladies. You may recognize these four white guys from their other hits, such as the theme song for certified whitest television show, *The Big Bang Theory*. It's also important to note that the last time this group was nominated for a Grammy award was in 2001 for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group, which they lost to Steely Dan. The next group to perform was Unexpected Resolution, otherwise known as the boys in green. They razzled the crowd with a jazz arrangement of Fall Out Boy's "Sugar, We're Goin Down". Unfortunately for the pop punk legends, their upcoming album *Mania* isn't set to release until early next year, meaning they are ineligible to be considered on the 2018 Grammy ballot. They'll have to wait until next year to get white men back on the Grammy committee's radar. The last group to take the stage was host Note to Self, whose set was so whiteboy whiney no one here at *The Gum Tree* can honestly remember what they performed. Maroon 5, maybe.

Supplemental Material

Logo



Above is the logo I designed for the website and further branding purposes. It was created in the vector image software, Adobe Illustrator.

Website

All the content included in this thesis can also be found at the URL thegumtreemag.com, which is hyperlinked in the digital version of this document.